

WHISTLESTOP GUIDE TO

HERBS



**REAL AND IMAGINED PROPERTIES
OF EUROPEAN HERBS**

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SILVER
BRANCH
GAMES

A WHISTLESTOP GUIDE TO HERBS

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INTRODUCTION

This document is a rapid tour of real European herbs that are noteworthy for their real or claimed medicinal, practical or magical properties. You can use it as a quick reference source to provide plot elements or useful colour in fantasy games, or in modern-day games with supernatural elements.

In many fantasy settings everyday folk medicine is likely to revolve around the plants found in the locality, and knowledge of herbs and their properties would be a valued skill. You could invent a whole load of fantasy plants, but far easier to start with the familiar.

It's a simple matter to extrapolate the plants' properties into the supernatural realm - perhaps Agrimony (opposite) can indeed become a cure-all potion or be used to channel such an effect in the hands of an apothecary, druid or Ordained Herbstalker (whatever that might be). Perhaps the power of Borage can be invoked to counter magical fear.

The *Growing* notes assume a temperate climate like Britain's. Some plants are listed as "garden herb" - they were introduced from other climate zones, often the Mediterranean, and are unlikely to be found growing wild. Of course plants naturally escape from gardens and spread to any niches where they can succeed; and in a warmer climate many of our most prized culinary herbs are found growing naturally.

Cautionary note. If you feel inspired to investigate the medicinal properties of herbs yourself, great - **but don't experiment on the basis of what you read here.** Even plants with healing properties can be dangerous if wrongly used, and the author accepts no consequences for that sort of thing. Get a proper book on herbs that's written for the real world rather than a game world, or consult a qualified adviser.

Sources

Lesley Bremness; 'The Complete Book of Herbs'; Dorling Kindersley; 1988

Christine Grey-Wilson; 'Collins Gem Guide: Herbs for Cooking and Health'; Collins; 1987

Anna Kruger, 'An Illustrated Guide to Herbs - their medicine and magic'; Dragon's World; 1992

THE PLANTS

Agrimony

Agrimonia eupatoria

Graceful plant with serrated leaves growing in pairs and thin 2ft spikes of small yellow flowers.

Growing - Waste ground, roadsides, along field edges, in hedgerows.

Medicinal - Beneficial eyewash. Soothing gargle. Wound healing. Digestive tonic.

Other - Once thought to heal almost any ailment. In folklore, a person sleeping with agrimony under the pillow will not wake till it's removed. Also said to be a poison antidote.



Alecost

Chrysanthemum balsamita

Leg-height plant with lanky stems, silvery green mint-scented leaves and heads of insignificant yellow flowers.

Growing - Full sun; rich, dryish, well-drained soil.

Medicinal - Infuse leaf as a tonic for colds, catarrh, upset stomach and cramps. Also eases childbirth. A crushed leaf will relieve bee stings, and leaves can be added to a salve for burns and stings.

Other - Minty scent of leaves repels insects - used with fabrics and as a strewing herb. Small amounts of leaf used as flavouring. Leaves and flowering tops used to clear, flavour and preserve beer.

Angelica

Garden *Angelica archangelica*, Wild *A. sylvestris*

Large, bright green leaves and thick hollow stems that can grow to head height, bearing sprays of small flowers that develop into seed heads.

Growing - Likes light shade and a deep, moist soil. Found in damp woods and meadows, and on river banks.

Medicinal - Tea made from the leaves is a tonic for colds and relieves flatulence. Seeds help digestion. Roots and stalks help bronchial troubles, coughs and colds.

Other - Praised in folklore as a panacea for all ills, and said to have angelic powers against evil spells and witchcraft. Seeds can be used as a flavouring, and leaves in a salad. Seeds (burned in a pan) and leaves perfume a room. Stems can be crystallised for decorating food.





Basil

Ocimum basilicum

Knee high with aromatic oval, toothed, bright green leaves and clusters of small whitish flowers.

Growing - Sun and warmth, in a moist soil. Garden herb - may have to be grown indoors in temperate regions.

Medicinal - An infusion of the leaf aids digestion and the scent helps with mental fatigue.

Other - Prized by cooks for its warm, spicy flavour. Several cultures have held it to have a divine essence or powers of protection and good luck. Deters flies.



Borage

Borago officinalis

Knee height, with grey-green hairy leaves and pure blue flowers.

Growing - Open, sunny position; light, dry, well-drained soil. Difficult to dry. Very rare in wild - usually an escape from gardens.

Medicinal - Leaf rich in mineral salts. A poultice soothes inflammation and bruises. Used against chest and throat complaints. Has been known to cure hangover. Said to dispel melancholy, impart gladness and give courage.

Other - Leaf gives a cucumbery flavouring. Flower used as a garnish. When the plant is burned the mineral content gives little explosions of sparks.



Caraway

Carum carvi

Knee height, with bright green feathery leaves and slender stems bearing heads of tiny white flowers.

Growing - Full sun, rich loam. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Raw or infused seed aids digestion, promotes appetite, sweetens breath and relieves flatulence.

Other - Seed used as a flavouring and to aid digestion. Young leaves can be used in salads and soups, and roots as a vegetable. Believed to protect against witches; also to prevent departures, so it was used in love potions.

Chamomile

There are three varieties: Perennial or Roman C. (*chamaemelum nobile*), German (annual) C. (*matricaria recutita*) and Dyer's C. (*Anthemis tinctoria*). Despite their differing species names they are related.

Low plant with feathery leaves and daisy-like white flowers.

Growing - Full sun; light, well drained soil. Roman C. is found rarely in grassy and heathy places in south England.

Medicinal - An infusion of the flowers is a general tonic and sedative, useful for digestive troubles, nervous disorders and headache. A compress can be used to treat wounds and eczema.

Other - Boosts ailing plants nearby. Flowers make a good skin tonic and hair conditioner, and can be used with leaves in potpourri. A strong yellow-brown dye comes from the flowers of Dyer's Chamomile.



Chervil

Anthriscus cerefolium

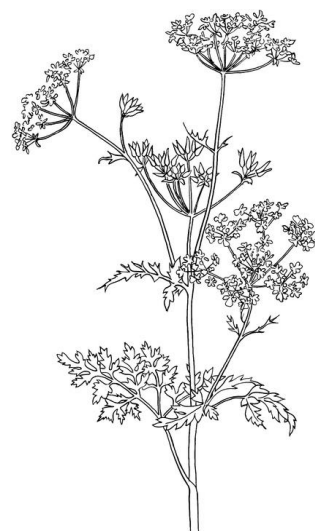
Knee height with lacy, fern-like leaves, slender stems and clusters of tiny white flowers in summer.

Growing - Light shade, well-drained soil. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Good supply of vitamins and minerals. Infusion stimulates digestion and alleviates circulation disorders, liver complaints and chronic catarrh. Juice reduces fevers and promotes sweating.

Other - Both leaf and stem are good to eat. An infusion is a useful skin tonic.

The related plant called Wild Chervil or, more commonly, Cow Parsley - *A. sylvestris* - is abundant on footpaths, roadsides, banks, etc. However, it is easily confused with a number of poisonous species, including Hemlock.



Chicory

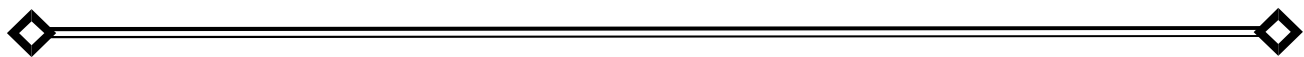
Cichorium intybus

Waist height with a hollow, furrowed stem, arrow-shaped leaves with a hairy underside and flowers of a clear blue in summer.

Growing - Sunny and open; light soil, preferably alkaline. Widespread but only locally common in England and Wales, usually in grassy and waste places on chalk and limestone.

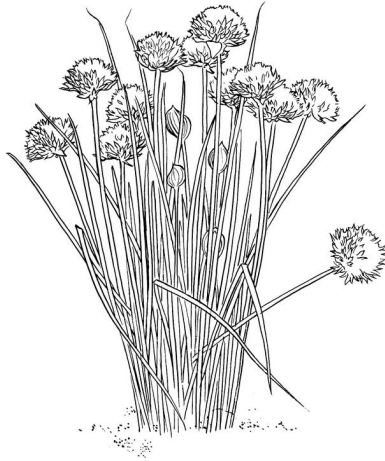
Medicinal - Leaf is rich in minerals and helps jaundice or spleen problems. A poultice soothes inflammation, boils and abscesses. An





infusion of the root is a tonic, mild laxative and diuretic. A decoction may help gallstones, kidney stones and inflammation of the liver or urinary tract.

Other - Used as a vegetable: young roots can be boiled, and leaves “forced” to give solid heads. Roasted and ground roots make a slightly bitter coffee substitute. Flower and leaf in salads. Leaf gives a blue dye.



Chives

Allium schoenoprasum

This member of the onion family has low clumps of tubular grass-like leaves, and globular mauve flowers in summer.

Growing - Mostly in gardens but sometimes found wild in rocky, limestone soils and on stream banks and damp grassland. Likes sun.

Medicinal - General tonic; promotes digestion.

Other - Culinary.

Coltsfoot

Tussilago farfara

Low clumps of thick, almost rubbery dark green leaves with grey undersides and small yellow flowers in spring.

Growing - Waste ground, railway embankments, and on hard, bare, shingly ground.

Medicinal - Cough remedy - expectorant, soothing. Once taken by smoking dried leaves. Also useful for bronchitis and asthma. Currently debate over possible toxic properties.

Comfrey

Symphytum officinale

Up to waist height, with thick-ribbed oval leaves rough to the touch and clusters of bell-like blue-mauve flowers.

Growing - Likes full sun and rich soil. Common in damp places, especially by running water - it likes ditches and river banks. Even a small root cutting will take hold, sending down a 10' taproot, often spreading wildly and becoming impossible to get rid of.

Medicinal - A powerful tissue healer. (The leaf and roots contain a protein that encourages cell division.) An infusion is a good general tonic, particularly for stomach ulcers, coughs and to promote healing generally. A poultice of fresh leaves is useful on skin irritations, burns, cuts, sprains and fractures. However, it can cause healing of a wound at surface level before it's healed at a deeper level.



Other - Has more protein in its leaf structure than any other known plant, and contains traces of many vitamins and minerals. The leaf can be cooked like spinach, and the stem like asparagus. Leaves give a golden fabric dye. Useful “green manure” soil fertiliser.

Coriander

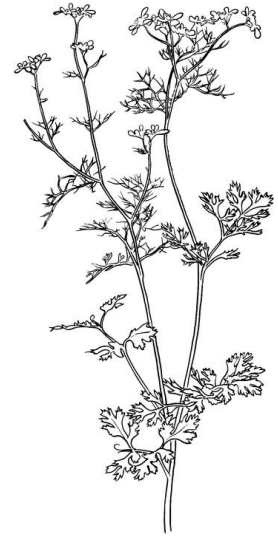
Coriandrum sativum

Knee height, with slender pale green stem, scalloped lower leaves and feathery upper leaves, and heads of small white-pink flowers.

Growing - Full sun; rich, light soil. Grows wild in a few scattered places.

Medicinal - Chew or infuse seed for a digestive tonic and mild sedative. An infusion of the leaves will ease stomach cramps. Ointment soothes stiff joints and rheumatic aches and pains.

Other - Seed gives a warm, spicy flavouring. Fresh lower leaves give an aromatic parsley flavour. Stem and fresh root can be cooked. Once put into love potions as an aphrodisiac.



Deadnettle

Lamium species

Looks very like the stinging nettle, but is not related and doesn't sting. Leaves are heart-shaped with serrated edges. Flowers are usually white, orchid-like, growing around the stem.

Growing - Grows well in most soils. The white deadnettle is common in hedgebanks and waste places, while the purple-flowered version is abundant in cultivated soils. Both prefer full sun.

Medicinal - Decoction of flowers is a blood purifier. Bruised leaves applied to the skin staunch bleeding. A tea made from dried leaves encourages perspiration.

Other - Leaves can be eaten, e.g. in omelettes. Flowers sweet to chew.

Dill

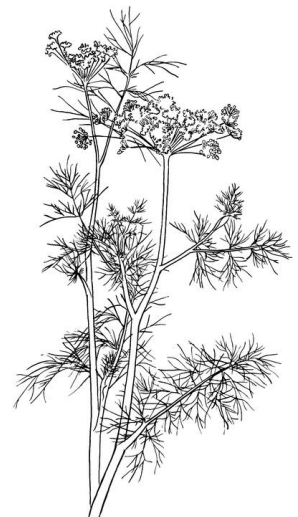
Anethum graveolens

Waist height, with a tall, hollow stem bearing feathery leaves and heads of tiny yellow flowers in summer. Distinctive sharp aniseed smell.

Growing - Full sun, rich and well-drained soil, protection from wind. Garden herb.

Medicinal - An infusion of the seeds helps indigestion, flatulence, hiccups, stomach cramps, insomnia and colic.

Other - Once prized as protection against witchcraft and infused in wine to enhance passion. Flavouring.





Fennel

Foeniculum vulgare

Head height, with a dark green stem bearing feathery aniseed smelling leaves and heads of small yellow flowers, becoming seeds.

Growing - Full sun; prefers well-drained loam. Locally distributed throughout the south, less common in the north. Occurs on cliffs, waste ground and damp places, especially near the sea.

Medicinal - Tea from the seed aids digestion and eases constipation. Chewing the seed allays hunger and eases indigestion. May also reduce the toxic effects of alcohol on the body. A decoction of the seed is a useful eye bath.

Other - Seed can be used as flavouring and sprouted. Finely chop leaf over salads and cooked dishes. Add young stems to salads. Said to be powerful against evil: combating poisons, dispelling spirits and countering witchcraft.

Feverfew

Chrysanthemum parthenium or *Tanacetum parthenium*

Knee height clumps of divided leaves, mid- to yellow-green, and white daisy-like flowers.

Growing - Wood edges, walls, hedgerows, roadsides and waste ground. Self-seeds furiously.

Medicinal - One of the most useful herbs against headache and migraine. Also helps indigestion and poor sleep. Relieves bites and stings.

Other - Once considered a general tonic, including curing ague, lifting the spirits and keeping disease away. Can repel insects.



Garlic

Allium sativum

Low clumps of flat, solid leaves, with the bulb growing underground.

Growing - Prefers sun. Garden herb. (Ramsons, also known as wild garlic, is a different member of the onion family.)

Medicinal - Can be used as an antibiotic, to cleanse blood, reduce blood pressure, bring down fevers and clear catarrh - helpful against common colds, worms, dysentery and typhoid.

Other - Cooking - rich in vitamins. Sometimes has a beneficial effect on neighbouring plants.



Hops

Humulus lupulus

A vigorous climbing plant with heart-shaped, rough-textured leaves. Female flowers resemble small yellow-green pine cones.

Growing - In southern areas it grows wild in damp hedgerows and thickets, liking humus-rich soils and shelter.

Medicinal - Digestive and sedative. A pillow stuffed with dried hops can aid sleep. Antiseptic, reduces inflammation. Excessive amounts may impair male sexual function and interrupt the menstrual cycle in women.

Other - Flavouring and preservative for beer.



Horseradish

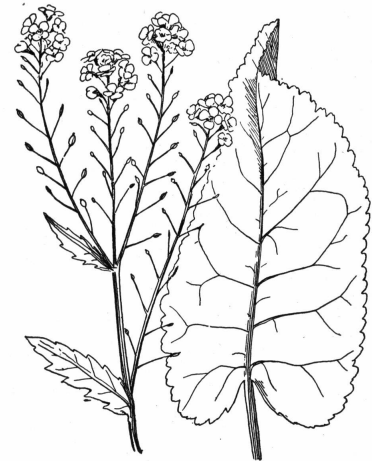
Armoracia rusticana

Leg height clump of large elliptical leaves with a pungent smell when bruised.

Growing - Open sunny position. Light, rich, moist soil. Very common in waste ground in the south, like railway cuttings, derelict gardens, even abandoned brick piles.

Medicinal - The powerful fumes released when grating the root put onions to shame. Best used quickly, as it loses its potency in a few days. Root contains vitamins and minerals, and has antibiotic properties. Grated root in food stimulates digestion, eliminates mucus and waste fluids. As a syrup it is useful against bronchitis and coughs. In a poultice it helps against chilblains, stiff muscles, sciatica and rheumatism.

Other - Young leaves in salads; grated root in salads, pickles etc. (cooking destroys the flavouring oil in the root). Horseradish sauce is a well-known condiment.



Hyssop

Hyssopus officinalis

Knee height clump of upright stems bearing small narrow leaves and spikes of flowers in deep blue (or sometimes pink, purple or white).

Growing - Garden escape, likes dry, rocky or chalky soils.

Medicinal - Helps with chest complaints, catarrh, sore throats. Poultice or infusion for bruising.

Other - Flavouring for food. Strewing on floors to freshen the air. Thought to have powers of cleansing and purification.



Lady's Mantle

Alchemilla vulgaris

Low clump of soft round leaves made of folded lobes that collect drops of rain. Stems bear clusters of greenish-yellow flowers in summer.

Growing - Likes sun and rich, moist soil. Common in grassy places, though rarer in the south and east.

Medicinal - A tea made from the green parts of the plant is helpful during pregnancy, after giving birth, to regulate menstrual cycle and to relieve menopausal discomfort. Also useful as a mouth rinse after tooth extraction, and to relieve diarrhoea. A compress heals wounds and reduces inflammation.

Other - Young leaves can be used in salads. Leaves give a green wool dye.



Lavender

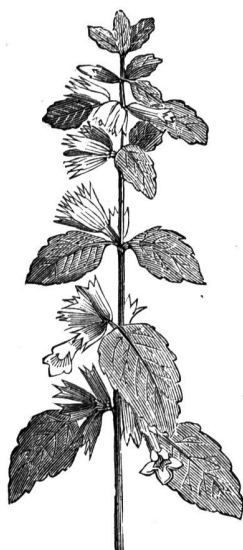
Lavandula officinalis

Knee height bush of stems with a grey or blue tinge, bearing narrow leaves and spikes of purple flowers. Gives off a distinctive scent.

Growing - Garden herb. Likes stony, well-drained soils in sunny situations.

Medicinal - Soothing and sedative - useful for nervous headaches, tension and sleeplessness. Antiseptic - a lotion can be used to clean wounds. Also good on burns and scalds - can prevent blistering. Insect repellent.

Other - Used widely for its scent: in bath or wash water, hanging in wardrobes to scent clothes, masking household smells, strewing on floors.



Lemon Balm

Melissa officinalis

Waist height bush with light green oval leaves with a toothed edge, and clusters of small, pale yellow flowers. Refreshing lemony scent.

Growing - Garden herb. Likes rich, moist soil and a sunny position.

Medicinal - Has a sedative and uplifting effect on the central nervous system, so useful for depression, headaches, restlessness, etc. Aids digestion. Best used fresh.

Other - Much loved by bees. Gives a lemon tang in drinks, salads, jellies, etc.

Marigold

Calendula officinalis

Knee height plant with narrow leaves and yellow-orange flowers.

Growing - Sunny position, most soils. Not found wild.

Medicinal - The flower is the most important part - it's soothing, healing and antiseptic. Ointment used for leg ulcers, varicose veins, bed sores, cuts, burns and bruises. An infusion promotes digestion and stimulates bile, and can be used as a mouthwash after tooth extraction. Oil extracted from the petals is useful in many skin complaints. Leaves have been used to treat open wounds.

Other - Petals in food give yellow colour and tangy flavour. Leaves can be sprinkled in salads and stews. Flowers give a pale yellow dye.



Wild Marjoram/Oregano

Origanum vulgare

Knee height bush with rounded leaves and clusters of white or pink flowers (though varieties differ quite a bit).

Growing - Chalk downs or limestone in full sun.

Medicinal - Antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, expectorant, digestive. Used against coughs, colds and flu; bronchitis and asthma; mouth and throat infections; tension headaches; and pain in the muscles or joints.

Other - Flavour in cooking (sweet marjoram better). Strewing on floors. Sweet marjoram was used to crown newly wed couples and placed on tombs, bringing joy and comfort to both the living and the dead. Said to be an antidote to poison.



Marsh Mallow

Althaea officinalis

Head height, with stems bearing large, velvety, grey-green tear-shaped leaves and pink or white flowers.

Growing - Full sun and moist soil. Likes boggy places, e.g. dykes and coastal marshes.

Medicinal - The root contains a soothing mucilage. An infusion is useful for coughs, diarrhoea and insomnia. Add to ointment for burns. Put in a poultice for inflammations.

Other - Seeds, flowers, leaves and root can all be eaten. The root is the source of the original marshmallow sweets. Boiling the leaves or steeping the root gives a liquid good for dry hands, sunburn, dry hair and face lotions.





Meadowsweet

Filipendula ulmaria

Waist height reddish stems bear pointed oval leaves, dark green above and grey green below. Sprays of cream-coloured flowers in summer.

Growing - Sun or partial shade; moist, fertile, alkaline soil. Widespread and often abundant, by fresh water, in fens and marshy places and damp woods. Dropwort (*F. vulgaris*), a shorter plant with larger flowers, is found on dry chalk and limestone downland.

Medicinal - A tea made from the flowers helps rid the body of excess fluid and alleviates heartburn, feverish colds and mild diarrhoea. It's also a mild sedative and painkiller (containing the active ingredient of aspirin). The whole plant is soothing to the stomach and bowel.

Other - Flower gives slight almond flavour to jams, beer, wine, etc. Leaf can also be used as a flavouring. Widely used for strewing on floors because of the scent - was once much in demand for church weddings. A versatile dye plant: greenish-yellow from the flowering top, blue from the leaf and stem, and black from the roots.



Mint

Mentha species

There are many different mint species. They vary in requirements and properties, like having a hint of apple or lemon in their scent. Most are knee to leg height with serrated oval leaves.

Growing - Species found in the wild prefer moist, fairly shady positions.

Medicinal - Cooling, anti-spasmodic, anaesthetic, decongestant. Good against stomach ache, indigestion, menstrual cramps, tension headaches, tiredness, aching muscles and joints. Also as a general pick-me-up.

Other - Culinary flavouring and refreshing scent. Said to stir up lust and appetite. A symbol of hospitality. Strewing on floors.



Mullein

Verbascum thapsus

Head height stems bear large woolly leaves and bright yellow flowers.

Growing - Likes sunny sheltered spots on poor, well drained soil.

Medicinal - Flower and leaf infused for coughs and respiratory problems. Flower used to soften and soothe skin.

Other - Leaves used as tinder and herbal tobacco. Once said to protect against magic.

Mustard

Brassica species

Can reach head height. Fast-growing. Stems bear oval, pointed leaves with lighter undersides and clusters of yellow flowers.

Growing - Sunny position, fertile and well-drained soil. White mustard (*Sinapsis alba*) is a common weed in arable land, especially chalky soils.

Medicinal - Seed crushed in warm water induces vomiting. Powdered and made into a poultice it draws blood to the skin or lungs, and relieves pain and inflammation in rheumatism, arthritis, congested lungs and chilblains. A footbath warms feet and relieves colds.

Other - Known for its hot, bitter flavor; also has preservative properties. Seed as flavouring and in pickles; flower in salads or sandwiches; young leaves in salads. Was thought to be an aphrodisiac and included in love potions.

Nettle, Stinging

Urtica dioica

Waist high with square stems bearing pointed, toothed leaves that sting when touched and tiny greenish flowers in summer.

Growing - Everywhere. If you can't find it turn in your herbalist's badge.

Medicinal - A cleanser and general tonic, rich in vitamins and minerals. Infusion soothes rheumatic pains, aids digestion and combats eczema.

Other - Stem yields fibres which can be used in rope, cloth and paper. Whole plant yields a yellow-green to grey-green dye. Can be cooked, e.g. as a soup, as this destroys the sting.



Parsley

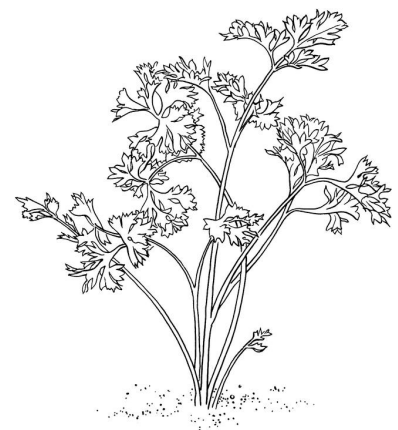
Petroselinum crispum

Knee height with bright green leaves, curled with toothed edges.

Growing - Rich moist soil in full sun or light shade. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Leaf can be chewed to freshen breath and promote healthy skin, infused for a digestive tonic and made into an antiseptic dressing. Root can help with kidney trouble and act as a mild laxative.

Other - Culinary garnish and flavouring; rich in vitamins and minerals. Was worn in garlands to counter strong odours. Has been linked with both victory and death.





Raspberry

Rubus idaeus

Upright stems with tear-shaped leaves, small spines, and white flowers turning to fragrant red fruit.

Growing - Woodland clearings, wood edges, railway embankments, heathland, etc. Likes moist, nutrient-rich soil.

Medicinal - Infusion of the leaf is used during the last months of pregnancy to strengthen the muscles, reduce blood loss during birth, etc. Also helpful for diarrhoea in children and against mouth ulcers.

Other - Eaten raw and in preserves.



Rosemary

Rosmarinus officinalis

Waist height (or more) shrub with woody stems bearing dark, leathery, needle-like leaves and blue (sometimes white) flowers. Has a resinous scent a little like pine.

Growing - Sun, good drainage and freedom from cold winds. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Stimulating and warming, increasing blood circulation. Helps with digestive complaints, aching joints and rheumatic pains, and headaches.

Other - Flavouring and scent. Dried and burned, it purifies the air. The scent repels moths. Said to improve the memory, so it became an emblem of fidelity for lovers.



Rue

Ruta graveolens

Knee height evergreen shrub. Leaves are blue-green and made of rounded lobes. Greenish-yellow flowers in summer.

Growing - Likes sun and well-drained, alkaline soil. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Tea stimulates menstruation, appetite, perspiration and bile, and contains useful minerals. Added to compresses for wounds and skin ulcers. Used against hysteria, epilepsy and abnormal blood pressure. *This is a powerful plant, which should be taken only under qualified supervision and never during pregnancy.*

Other - Can be used in very small amounts as a musky flavouring. Said to have great magical powers, keeping off plague and evil spirits and taken as an antidote to all deadly poisons.

Sage

Salvia officinalis

Knee height evergreen shrub with thick spear-shaped leaves - usually grey-green but there are purple varieties. Flowers usually mauve-blue.

Growing - Full sun and a light, dry soil. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Good against infections, especially of the mouth and throat. Tea helps digestion, and is a nerve and blood tonic. It reduces sweating, soothes coughs and colds, helps combat diarrhoea and may help menstrual problems. Applied externally it assists wound healing. An important part of the herbalist's kit.

Other - Excellent, though strong, flavour in cooking. The smell discourages insects and removes other smells - use dried leaves, burn or boil.



Sorrel

Rumex acetosa

Waist high stems bearing spear-shaped leaves and red-green flower spikes. (There's also a low-growing, milder buckler-leaved sorrel.)

Growing - Meadows and grassland, roadsides and open woods. Likes rich, moist soil.

Medicinal - Reduces fever. Sore throats. Vitamin C content once helped in cases of scurvy.

Other - Culinary - sharp lemony tang in salads and cooked dishes.

Oxalic acid content can damage kidneys in large doses.



Strawberry, Wild

Fragaria vesca

Low-growing plant with three-lobed toothed leaves, white flowers and sweet red fruit.

Growing - Clearings in woods and forests, dry grassland in shady spots. Spreads by runners as well as seeds.

Medicinal - Useful against diarrhoea, fever and gout.

Other - Eaten, known for its sweetness. Often associated with the fairy folk.





Tarragon

Artemisia dracunculoides

Leg height, with long, narrow glossy leaves that release a warm, peppery scent and small round green-white flowers.

Growing - Sunny sheltered site; rich, light, dry soil. Garden herb.

Medicinal - Leaves are rich in vitamins and minerals. Infusion is an appetite stimulant, digestive and general tonic. Root used to cure toothache.

Other - Flavouring. named for the dragon, it was believed to cure the bites of venomous creatures.



Thyme

Thymus vulgaris

Low shrub or creeper, depending on variety, with small pointed oval leaves and pale lilac (or ranging between pink and white) flowers.

Growing - Dry, rocky or well-drained soils in good sun.

Medicinal - Strongly antibacterial. Tea used for gastro-intestinal complaints and to expel intestinal parasites. Antispasmodic properties - good for sore throats, irritable coughs and bronchitis. Mouthwash combats gum infections.

Other - Thought to bring courage, and protect from the plague. Also associated with death, and thought to bring fairies or allow them to be seen. Culinary. Preservative - used in embalming.



Valerian

Valeriana officinalis

Waist high round, grooved stems bear narrow, toothed leaflets with a sharp scent and clusters of tiny pale pink flowers.

Growing - Likes cool roots and warm foliage, and a rich, moist soil. Seen in damp woods, ditches and marshes.

Medicinal - Root acts as a depressant on central nervous system. A sedative for mild insomnia, sudden emotional distress, headaches, intestinal cramps and nervous exhaustion.

Other - Boosts growth of nearby plants - stimulates earthworm activity. Leaves add minerals to compost. Root attracts cats and vermin (can be used in traps). Said to have powers over witches and as an aphrodisiac.

Vervain

Verbena officinalis

Waist high stem with narrow, lobed leaf, glossy and slightly hairy, and spikes of small pale lilac flowers.

Growing - Roadsides, rough pastures, waste ground. Prefers chalky soils.

Medicinal - Strengthens the nervous system - good for tension, depression and nervous exhaustion. Helpful for complaints linked with tension, like indigestion, asthma, headache and migraine. Helps to fight fevers and speeds recovery from infections.

Other - Associated with mysticism and magic, e.g. as an altar plant. A herb of purification and prophecy. Worn as lucky charms, thought to protect against headaches and snakebite. Made into love charms and potions.

Violet

Viola odorata

Low plant, spreading by runners, with heart-shaped leaves and scented violet or white flowers in spring.

Growing - Semi-shade in rich soil.

Medicinal - The flowers, leaves and roots are helpful for coughs and bronchitis. Flowers soothe nerves, headaches and insomnia.

Other - Flower used in cosmetics, perfumes and crystallised with sugar as sweets and dessert decorations. A symbol of love and fertility.



Wild Celery/Smallage

Apium graveolens

Leg height branching stems with light green fan-shaped toothed leaves and clusters of small greenish-cream flowers.

Growing - Likes sun and shelter from strong winds, in soil that's rich, moist and well drained. Widespread but local in damp places near the sea, mainly in the south and east.

Medicinal - The seed calms nerves, promotes restfulness and eases flatulence and some kidney disorders. The leaf is rich in vitamins and minerals. An infusion acts as a tonic and appetiser, and eases indigestion and colic. Juice from the leaf and stem stimulates urine.

Other - Seeds and leaves edible, usually in small quantities due to strong flavour.



Wormwood

Artemisia absinthium

Waist height shrub, grey-green with silky hairs. Leaves are deeply lobed like fingers.

Growing - Full sun and light well-drained soil.

Medicinal - Has been used in small doses to expel worms and as a general tonic, but too much can cause heart damage and hallucinations.

Other - A very bitter herb. Repels insects. An infusion can be used as a disinfectant. Used to make the alcoholic drink absinthe.



Yarrow

Achillea millefolium

Leg high hollow stem bearing long, feathery leaves and heads of small, dull white flowers.

Growing - Likes sun and rich, moist soil. Grows in abundance in grassy places - often found as low clumps in lawns.

Medicinal - A potent healer. Fresh leaves used to staunch blood, e.g. wounds or nosebleeds. Chew fresh leaf to relieve toothache, make a decoction for inflamed gums. Tea helps digestion, regulates menstrual flow, induces perspiration, cleanses the system and fights colds. Decoction helps wounds, chapped skin and rashes.

Other - Leaves used in salad. Helps nearby plants resist disease. Leaves assist breakdown of compost. Stalks were used for divination in China.